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ABSTRACT

Abstracts of three papers on individuated instruction center on the need for a redefinition of terminology and continued research of its implications in the teaching of foreign languages. The abstracted papers include: (1) Howard Altman's "Toward A Definition of Individualized Instruction," (2) Barbara Gordon's "The Speech Community of the School and Individualized Instruction," and (3) Leon Jakobovits' "Compensatory Foreign Language Instruction." (RL)

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SEMINAR ON PROGRAMMED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION:

INDIVIDUATED INSTRUCTION,

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Abstracts.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF INDIVIDUALIZED FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION*

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There is no doubt about it: almost every foreign language teacher in the country is hearing about something called "individualized instruction" these days. It has proven quite difficult, however, to define what "individualized instruction" means when it is applied to the foreign language classroom. The professional literature abounds with attempts to define this term, but these "definitions" are either vague or overly general, and their authors certainly do not have the problems of the foreign language classroom in mind. Two examples of such "definitions" will illustrate this point:

> Individualizing is a way to think about managing the classroom... It is the way a teacher arranges children, equipment, and materials so that each child can learn eagerly at the peak of his potential, without undue stress and strain.[1]

> An instructional system is individualized when the characteristics of each student play a major part in the selection of objectives, materials, procedures, and time. It is achieved when <u>decisions</u> about objectives and how to achieve them are based on the individual student.[2]

These two "definitions" are both true and accurate. Alas, they do not give the foreign language teacher a clue as to the practical classroom application of individualization of instruction. Before suggesting a working definition for this term here, it would be useful to state what "individualized foreign language instruction" is <u>not</u>. This is done in an effort to dispel some of the myths which tend to cling to controversial issues in education.

First of all, "individualized instruction" is <u>not</u> a "method" of teaching foreign languages. It is <u>not</u> the long-sought synthesis of audio-lingual theory (thesis) and cognitive code-cracking (antithesis). It is <u>not</u> dependent upon the use (or non-use) of pattern drills, it makes <u>no</u> statement about the use of English in the foreign language classroom, it offers <u>no</u> advice about teaching grammar inductively, deductively, or at all!

Secondly, "individualized instruction" in foreign languages is <u>not</u> the same phenomenon as "do-your-own-thing." This author recently heard a new "convert" to individualized instruction tell her high school Spanish class on the opening day of the school year: "Okay, class, when you come back tomorrow I want you to tell me what you would like to do this year." If those kids were honest, I bet that teacher must have been ready to "uncovert" the following day. The point is, individualized instructio involves <u>instruction</u>; "do-your-own-thing" may well require <u>zero</u> instruction. Even at its most palatable, foreign language study involves countless hours of work which are <u>nobody's</u> "thing," except possibly the teacher's, and it is his duty to be able to provide instruction in those not-always-pleasant tasks if and when a student needs help

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Thirdly, "individualized instruction" is not "independent study," although the latter certainly has a place in an individualized program. Again, "independent study" is what the student ought to do for himself; "individualized instruction," on the other hand, is what the teacher does for the student. "Independent study" involves learning, "individualized instruction," teaching.

Lastly, " individualized instruction" does not mean that the foreign language teacher has to teach each student individually all the time. Pity the poor teacher who tries to explain the use of the indirect object to thirty different students in his classroom on thirty separate occasions!

The following working definition of "individualized foreign language instruction" has come out of the author's observations of several first-rate programs in Northern California: A program in foreign languages may be said to be individualized when:

a) each student is allowed to progress through his curriculum materials at his own pace;

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b) each student is tested only when he is prepared to be tested (thus implying that not all students in a class will be tested simultaneously;
c) when a student needs help, he works individually with his teacher, or with some other "resource person" in the classroom, in a tutorial manner; and
d) each student is aware of the nature of his learning task, and knows what he must demonstrate, and with what degree of accuracy he must demonstrate it, to receive credit for his work and to be able to move ahead in his materials.

The psychological rationale for this conception of education has been stated by Jakobovits (1970):

> Whereas our ability to learn far outstretches our ability to explain in specific terms just how we learn and
> Whereas we are unable to specify in specific terms just what it is to know a language, then
> Therefore it follows that it is impossible to teach a language, in the strongest sense of that word.[3]

Jakobovits' conception of the function of "teaching" is a remedial one. The teacher "compensates" the student whose ability to learn is impeded in some way, eg., by unclear materials, by waning motivation, by conflicting sources of stimulation (such as German grammar vs. a pretty girl on a warm spring day), etc. The premise here is one that foreign language teachers have sensed for a long time, but have usually been unwilling to admit: that all students, excluding those with psychophysical handicaps, can learn a foreign language to some degree, but not all students can be taught by the methodology of "teaching-it-to-the-middle-of-the-class." Consequently, if the foreign language teacher wishes to individualize instruction among his students, it is incumbent upon him to stop serving as a barrier to learning on the part of those to whom he was never really teaching anyway. It behooves every language teacher to ask himself from time to time: "How much learning goes on despite my presence, rather than because of it?" and conversely, "How much learning fails to go on because of my presence, which might go on without it?"

"Individualized Instruction" as a phenomenon focuses upon the student's desire and ability to learn uniquely. Students have always learned as individuals, despite the best efforts of the teacher to make them all into a "learning team." Individuals learn with different intensities, at different rates of speed, for different reasons, at different times, with different goals in mind. One effect of attempting to handle a body of heterogenous learners as if their differences in learning styles were irrelevant has been much antipathy shown toward foreign languages in the curriculum--by students, parents, counselors, school administrators, and teachers themselves. There is no inherent reason why foreign language enrollments have to fall simply because foreign language requirements have fallen! Indeed, those successful individualized programs known to this author have kept their students, and some have increased in enrollment, as students have turned their backs on other non-individualized areas of the school curriculum.

The definition we have offered for "individualized foreign language instruction" in this brief paper raises a host of further questions concerning the structure and organization of an individualized program. What is the role of the teacher in such a program? What sort of curriculum materials does each student use? How do I convince my administration to let me individualize my program? How proficient can the student become in the spoken language (as compared with "traditional" programs)?, etc. The literature on individualizing foreign language instruction is still quite sparse, but it is to be hoped that the profession will consider these questions, and other important ones left unanswered, and will produce guidelines for assisting the classroom teacher of foreign languages to individualize his instruction.

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[1]Jeannette Veatch, "Individualizing," in Virgil M. Howes, ed., Individualization of Instruction: A Teaching Strategy. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970. p. 90.

[2]Robert F. Mager, "Foreword" to Thorwald Esbensen, Working with Individualized Instruction: The Duluth Experience. Palo Alto, California: Fearon Publishers, 1968, p. vii.

[3]Leon A. Jakobovits, Foreign Language Learning: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Issues. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, 1970, pp. 144-45.

THE SPEECH COMMUNITY OF THE SCHOOL AND INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

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An analysis of FL instruction must take into account four distinct speech communities or sub-cultures: 1) the non-school speech community of the student (sociolinguistic norms and behavior patterns of the student's family); 2) the school speech community of the teacher (sociolinguistic norms and academic behavior pattern of the school achiever); 3) the non-school speech community of speakers of the target language (general communicative competence in a significant number of settings); and 4) the school speech community of the FL teacher (this being a specialized sub-part of 3). Where there is continuity between aspects 1 and 2, the learner can become a school achiever in all academic subjects, and where there is continuity between aspects 1, 2, and 4, the general school achiever is most likely to also be successful in his FL courses. However, the specialized communicative competence which this success represents does not overlap a great deal with aspect 3 above, which is to say that even the successful FL learner will not necessarily be able to communicate effectively with native speakers of the target culture in a significant number of situations. In fact, because new patterns of language behavior evolve in response to actual or anticipated social roles and the school by its specialized nature limits social communicative settings, the competence of the successful FL learner in school will be similarly specialized and restricted and will be inadequate for non-school settings. It follows that either we give up the notion that FL instruction in school can develop general communicative competence (aspect 3 above), or we change the school milieu in such a way as to diversify its characteristic specialized role settings. If the latter strategy is indeed feasible it suggests that the conditions that are appropriate for the teaching of a FL must be made different from those of any other school subject. These considerations are independent of and prior to those involved in the problem of individualizing FL instruction.

COMPENSATORY FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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The concept of individuated instruction embodies the notion of teaching under conditions of maximum responsiveness to the learner and is not to be confused with the notion of individual instruction which is the teaching of students on a one-to-one basis. The latter is essentially a peripheral issue since one can teach a single individual pupil according to the premises of mass education while one can teach a sizable classroom of pupils according to the premises of individuated instruction. The question of what teacher-student ratio is most advantageous is not as productive as the question of how we can become more responsive to learner characteristics under existing conditions of classroom size, whatever they may be in particular instances. The dimensions of difference between individuated and mass instruction are numerous and fundamental. The most salient include the following: an emphasis on learning rather than teaching, a conception of the teacher's role as a facilitator and co-learner rather than a disciplinarian invested with the sceptor of authority, a focus on learner readiness and development in preference to covering specified chunks of curricular materials, a recognition of the proper significance to be attached to teaching methodology--which amounts in FL learning to a diversification of goals of the overall curriculum with a simultaneous change towards greater specificity of goals for individual courses. The adjustment of a FL curriculum under the premises of individuated instruction takes the form of compensating for indivudual differences in learner characteristics that include aptitude, attitude, learning strategy, time available for study, and the socio-cultural matrix of interacting factors that impinge upon the school, the community, and the larger society.